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ABSTRACT

This study investigated neighborhood differences in perceptions of aggressive behavior from teachers and students' peers. Predominantly African American students (n=764) in grades 3 through 5 from 2 urban public schools (29 classrooms) in southern California participated in this study. The neighborhoods surrounding the schools differ substantially in the prevalence of violent crime. In each classroom, teachers and students assessed the level of aggression for class members. Teachers rated children in the more violent community as less aggressive than the children in the less violent community. However, more children in the violent community were perceived as aggressive by peers compared to their counterparts in the violent community. Gender and age differences in teacher perceptions were greater in the less violent neighborhood. Results are discussed in terms of the unique needs of children living in violent communities. (Contains 9 figures and 13 references.) (Author/SLD)

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Teacher and Peer Perceptions of Aggressive Behavior

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Abstract

This study investigated neighborhood differences in perceptions of aggressive behavior from two perspectives: teachers' and peers'. 764 predominantly African American students in grades 3-5 recruited from two urban public schools in southern California participated in the study. The neighborhoods surrounding the schools differ substantially in the prevalence of violent crime. In each classroom, teachers and students assessed the level of aggression for class members. Teachers rated children in the more violent community as less aggressive than children in the less violent community. However, more children in the violent community were perceived as aggressive by peers compared to their counterparts in the less violent community. Gender and age differences in teacher perceptions were greater in the less violent neighborhood. Results are discussed in terms of the unique needs of children living in violent communities.

Children who exhibit aggressive behavior at a young age are more likely to engage in aggressive behavior later in life and are at risk for peer rejection (Hudley, 1994), poor school adjustment and achievement, greater than average rates of school dropout, and referral for mental health problems later in life (Coie, Dodge, & Kuperschmidt, 1990). In addition, aggressive behavior in childhood (e.g., pushing other in toddlerhood) often leads to violence in adolescence (e.g., assault with an object) (Patterson, 1992).

One critical factor when investigating perceptions of aggression in children is their neighborhood of residence. Residents of urban communities are often victims of violent crimes. It seems reasonable to assume that children living in high crime areas might display high rates of antisocial behavior. Statistics confirm that children living in urban areas are more likely to exhibit antisocial behavior than their suburban and rural counterparts (California Department of Justice Statistics Center, 1995). Studies of neighborhood effects on child development in

urban areas have concentrated on economically impoverished communities (McLoyd, 1990) or have focused broadly on the construct of stress (Attar, Guerra, &Tolan, 1994). However, processes are not yet well understood that might explain how neighborhoods with varying characteristics affect the development of childhood aggression and violence.

The research presented here focuses on two distinct neighborhoods comprised predominantly of African Americans. The two neighborhoods differ markedly in economic resources and the prevalence of violent crime. Differences in perceptions of aggressive behavior within these two neighborhoods were investigated from two distinct perspectives: teachers' and peers'. We hypothesized that teacher perceptions of aggression would be higher for children living in the more violent neighborhood than for children in the less violent neighborhood. Similarly, we hypothesized that a larger group of students in the more violent neighborhood would be perceived as aggressive by their peers than in the less violent neighborhood.

Methods

Participants

- 764 predominantly African American students from two urban public schools in southern California

  (School 1: n = 461; School 2: n = 303)

- Twenty nine classrooms
- Mean ages of participants by grade level were 8.34, 9.18, and 10.38 years (for grades 3, 4, and 5 respectively)

Settings

Communities surrounding schools

	School 1	School 2
Violent Crimes	506	43
Arrests (Violent Crimes)	112	13
Median Household Income	$15,765	$23,490
% of households below the poverty level	37	17

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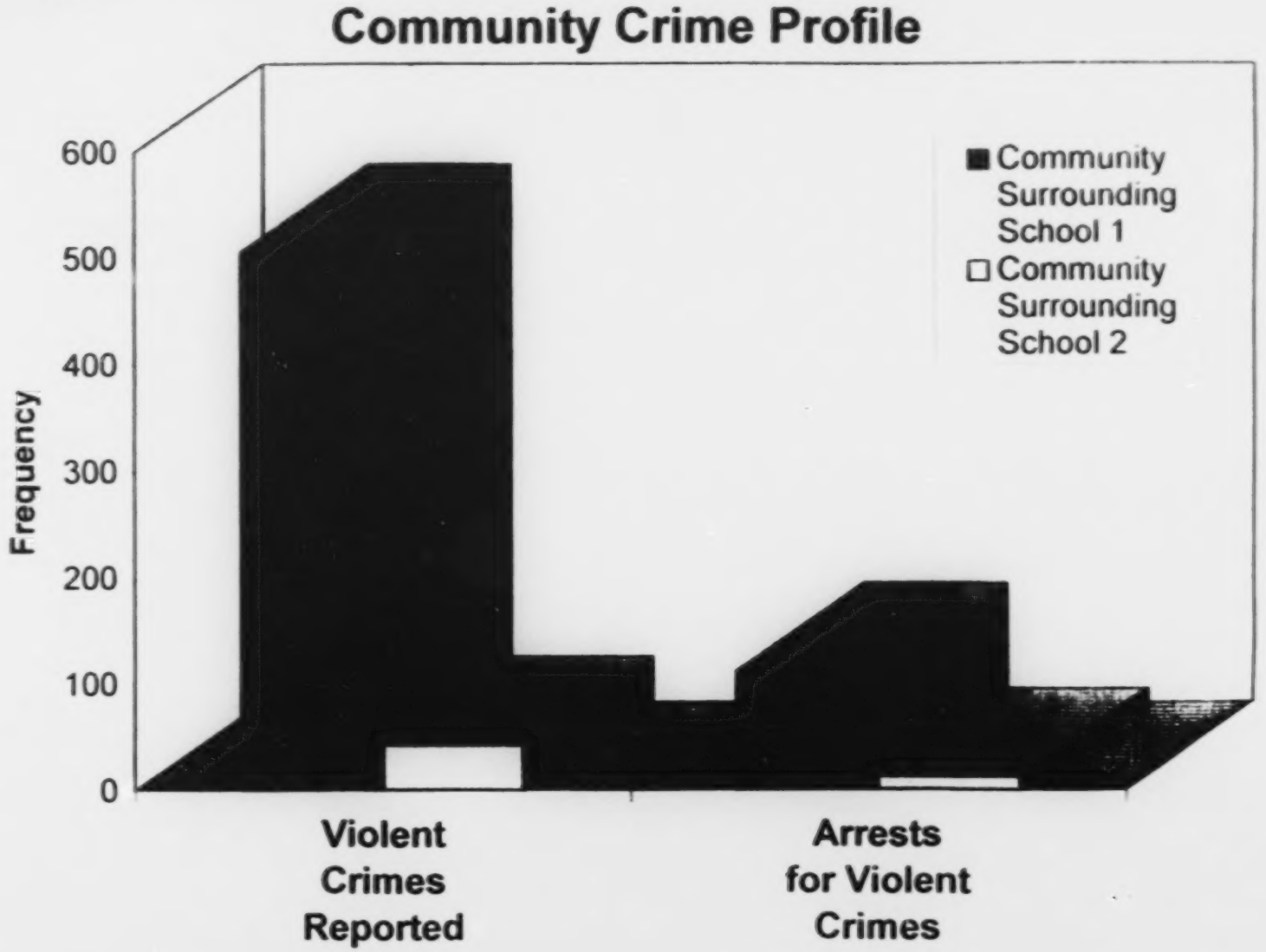
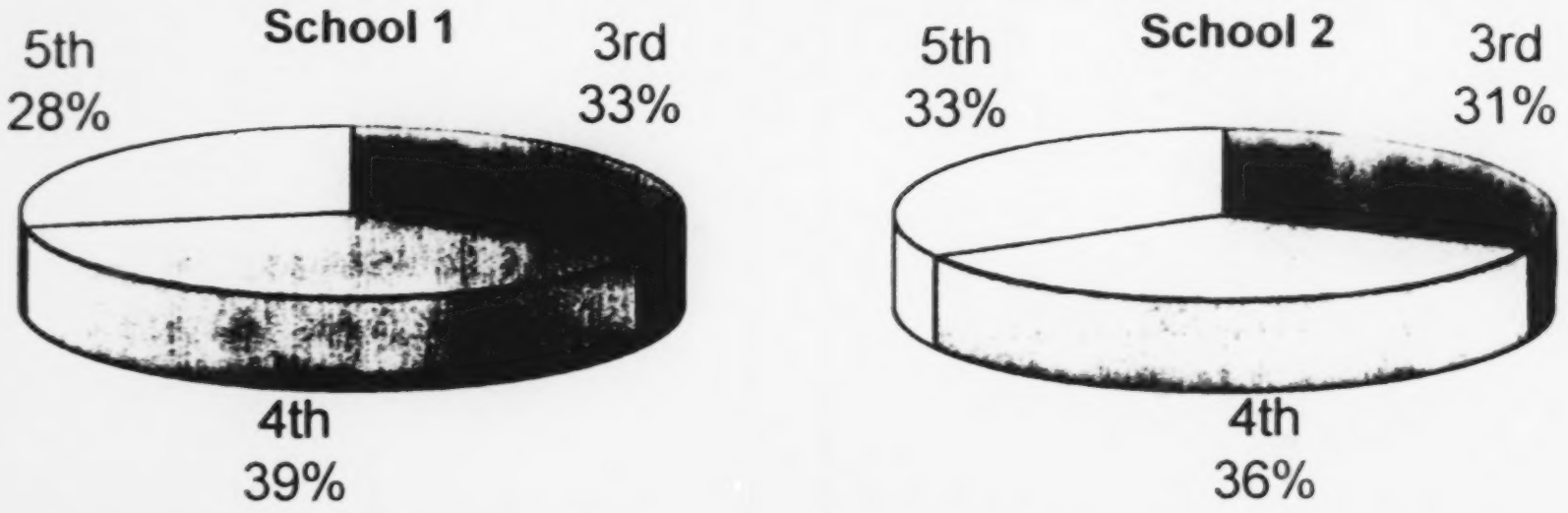


Violent crimes are defined as murder, rape, aggravated assault, and robbery (Los Angeles Police Dept., 1996)

Participants by Grade



Procedures

- Teachers completed the eight item aggression subscale of the Teacher Checklist (Coie, 1990; Coie & Dodge, 1988) for each of their students. Items consisted of verbal and physical aggressive behaviors.
- Students completed a 6 item sociometric questionnaire nominating peers on aggressive behaviors (starts fights, disrupts group, loses temper).
- Students completed a distractor exercise after completing the questionnaire to eliminate possible residual discussions of the negative peer assessments

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Results

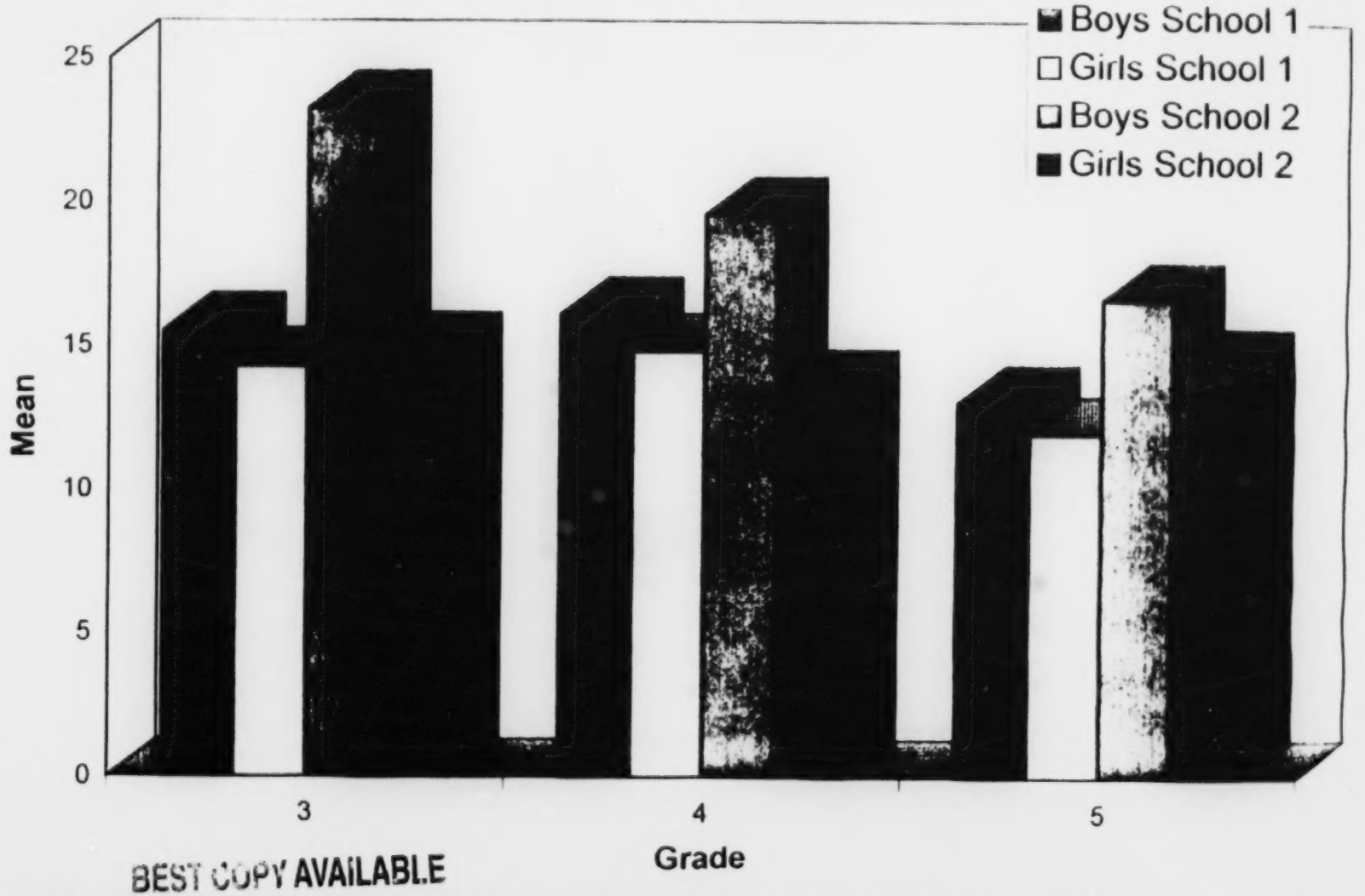
Teacher ratings

- Teacher ratings were summed to yield a composite aggression score ranging from 8-40, with higher numbers indicating more perceived aggressiveness.
- The multivariate analysis of the individual teacher ratings of verbal (says mean things) and physical (starts fights; uses physical force) aggression revealed a community type X gender interaction ($F[2, 725] = 6.90$, $p<.01$).
- A separate factorial analysis of variance (ANOVA) for the teacher composite variable revealed a significant community type X gender interaction ($F[1, 725] = 11.38$, $p<.001$).

Peer nominations

- Overall peer aggression scores were derived by summing each child's nominations for the three aggressive behavior items on the peer protocols.
- The multivariate analysis of peer nominations of aggression revealed a significant community type X grade X gender interaction ($F[6, 1486] = 3.00$, $p<.01$).

Mean Teacher Composite Score by School, Grade, and Gender



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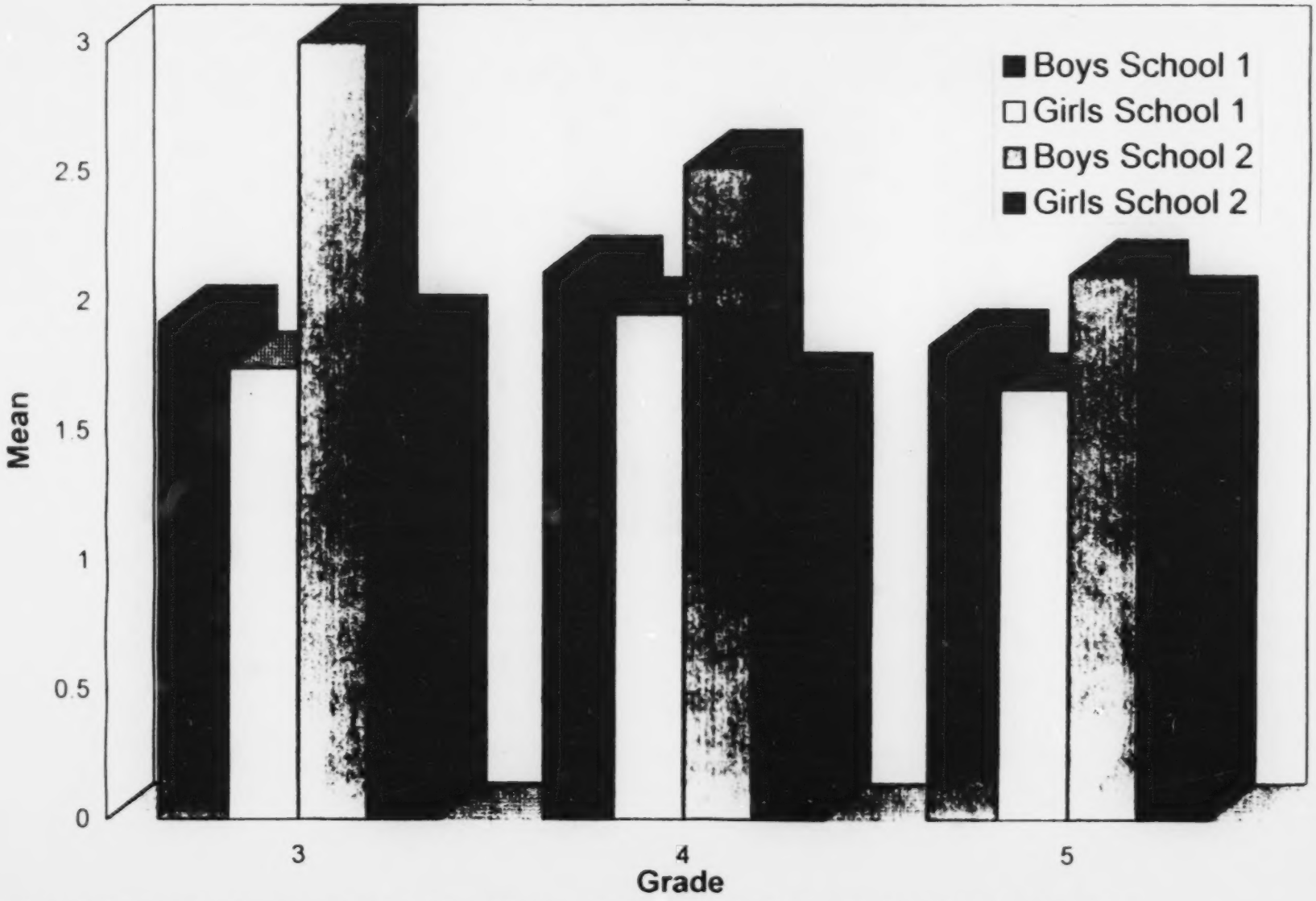
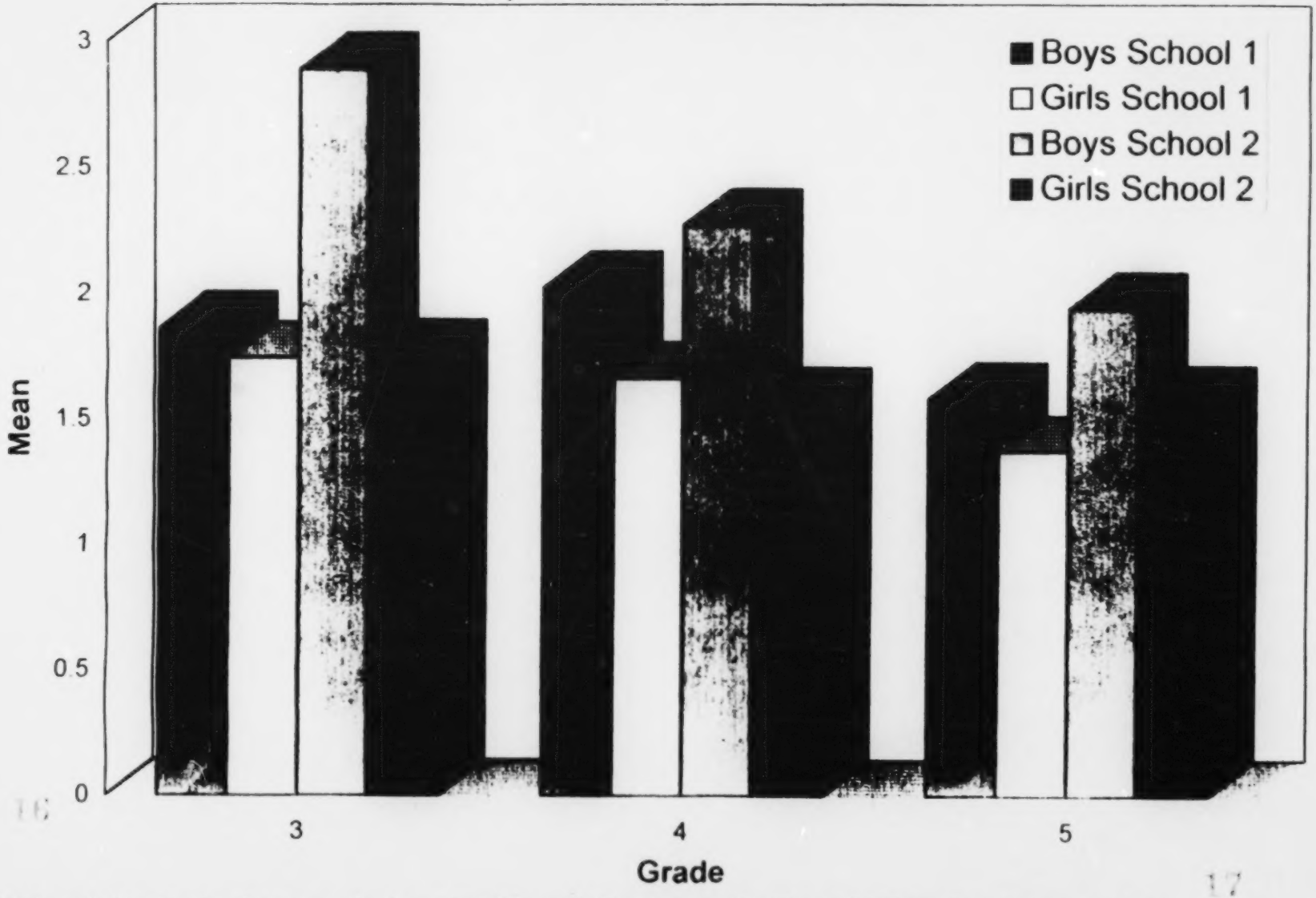
Univariate analysis revealed a significant *Community Type X Gender* interaction
$F(1, 725) = 11.38$, $p < .001$

Mean Teacher Rating of Verbal Aggression by School, Grade, and Gender



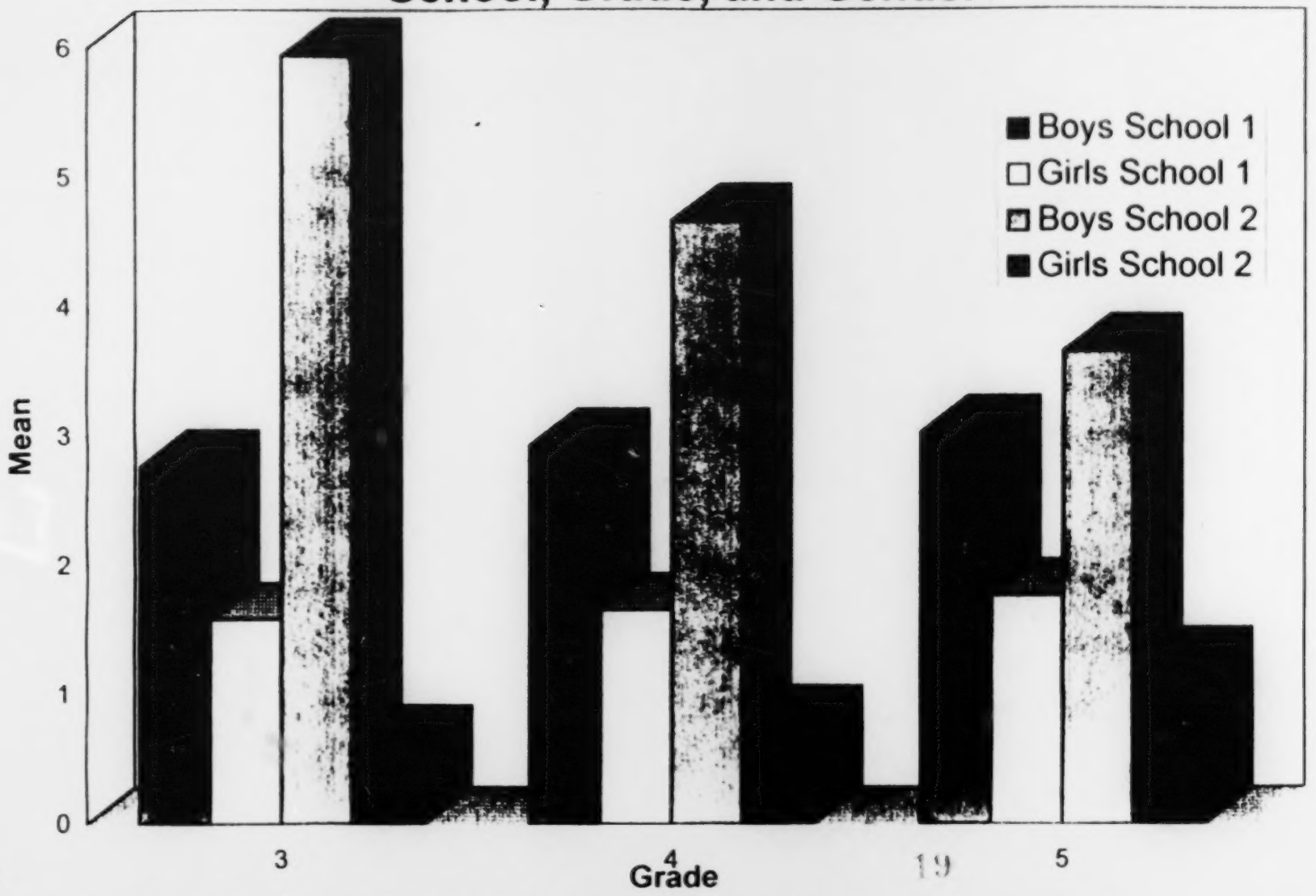
Univariate analysis revealed a significant *Community Type X Gender* interaction
$F(1, 726) = 8.44$, $p < .01$

Mean Teacher Rating of Physical Aggression by School, Grade, and Gender



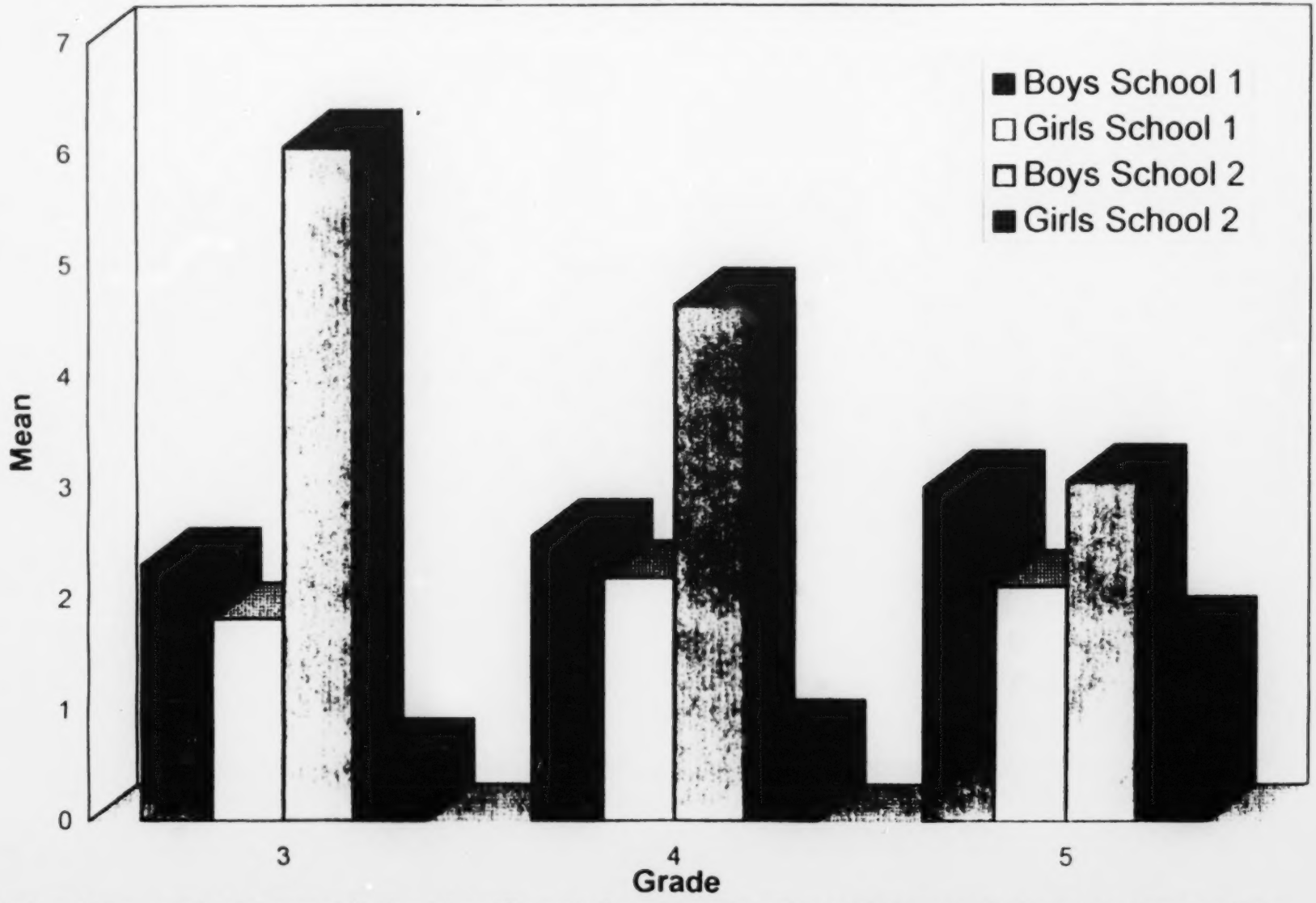
Univariate analysis revealed a significant *Community Type X Gender* interaction
$F(1, 726) = 9.39$, $p < .01$

Mean Peer Nominations for Starting Fights by School, Grade, and Gender



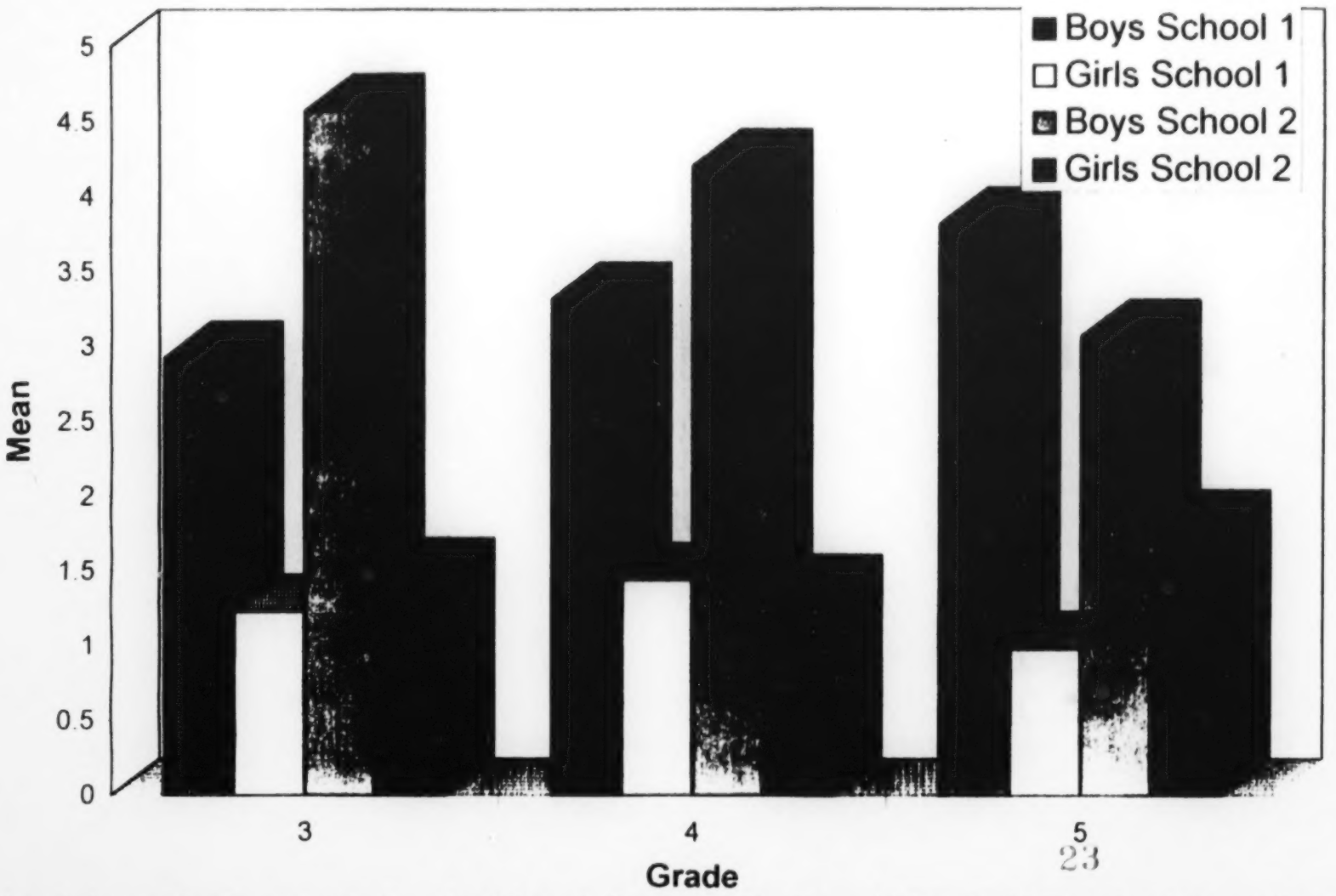
Univariate analysis revealed a significant *Community Type X Gender* interaction
$F(1, 745) = 28.33$, $p<.001$

Mean Peer Nominations for Disrupting Group by School, Grade, and Gender



Univariate analysis revealed a significant *Community Type X Grade X Gender* interaction $F(2, 745) = 7.44$, $p < .001$

Mean Peer Nominations for Losing Temper by School, Grade, and Gender



Univariate analysis revealed a significant *Community Type X Grade X Gender* interaction $F(2, 745) = 3.58$, $p < .05$

Discussion

As expected, more children in the violent community were seen as moderately aggressive by some peers. In contrast, fewer children in the less violent neighborhood were perceived as aggressive. Therefore, from the peer perspective, aggressive behavior is perceived as a fairly pervasive phenomenon in the more violent community.

Teacher perceptions also differed across communities but not in the same ways as did peer perceptions. Teachers in the less violent community rated their students to be more aggressive than did their counterparts in the more violent community. One possible explanation may be that children in the more violent community may exhibit more positive behavior than children in the less violent community. However, it is likely that teachers in the more violent community may have lower expectations for their students' behavior than their counterparts in the less violent community. The more positive ratings of children in the more violent community may reflect the belief that these children are unable to behave in ways that would be required of students from more advantaged communities (Turner, 1993).

In general, teachers perceived boys as more aggressive than girls. Also, boys received more nominations than girls by their peers. This concurs with multiple findings that boys are perceived to be more physically aggressive than girls (Archer, Peerson, & Westerman, 1988). In addition, teachers viewed older children as less aggressive than younger children. This may be explained by self-regulation: among those who study metacognition, there is general consensus that younger children are not as skilled at self control as are older children (Pressley, 1979). At the school in the more violent neighborhood, gender and grade differences were less pronounced. Perhaps teacher's expectations based on the school community are more salient than those based on gender or grade.

Based on these findings, it appears that educational initiatives to address childhood aggressive behavior should be broad based, targeting not only children but also the school context. Such efforts would involve the development of greater self-awareness of personal stereotypes and expectations for students among teachers in urban, disadvantaged communities.

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